

## CHAPTER 9

# CONTEMPORARY EXISTENTIALIST TENDENCIES IN PSYCHOLOGY

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### HOW EXISTENTIALISM AND PSYCHOLOGY MEET

Modern psychology's relation to existentialism takes at least three discernible forms. Firstly, theory and practice (particularly in psychotherapy, but also in other areas of psychology) that is directly traceable to philosophers and other writers who are termed "existentialist."<sup>1</sup> Secondly, theory and practice that is not traceable in this way, but which raises questions, uses concepts or interprets findings in ways that are markedly existential. (Here, it is often the case that the researchers in question are unaware of the connection.) Thirdly, apparently non-existentialist psychological ideas—say, naturalistic, or psychodynamic insights—that are (coincidentally or not) found in the works of existentialist philosophers.

In the first category—direct influence—it is useful to distinguish between philosophers who were not in any strict sense psychologists, and philosophers whose subject matter is sometimes explicitly psychological. Of the former kind those most commonly cited include Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty; and of the latter kind, Sartre, Buber and Tillich. One thinker who has written both purely philosophical and purely psychological works is Karl Jaspers (Jaspers, 1913/1963), but he is an oddity in this respect in that, although initiating a phenomenological methodology, was scientific.<sup>2</sup> Another category of influences are thinkers who are not themselves usually labeled as existentialist,

but who share various themes and ideas with the usual canon. This includes psychoanalysts like Rank (for his emphasis on the will and creativity) and Lacan (for, among other things, his placing the ego on a more intersubjective footing), and philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Ricoeur and Foucault.

Some landmarks in the development of existential psychology and psychiatry are, in Europe, Binswanger's Heidegger-influenced *Dream and Experience* (1930) and Boss' Heidegger influenced (and approved) *Psychoanalysis and Daseinsanalysis* Boss (1957/1963, see Jenner, this volume); and in America May, Angel, and Ellenberger (1958). With articles by Binswanger and Minkowsky, along with contributions by the editors, this latter book signaled the beginning of the existential psychology movement in the States. In the early 1960s May and Adrian van Kaam started the *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*. Notable among the contributors and editors over the years are Paul Tillich, Gabriel Marcel, Viktor Frankl, Leslie Farber, R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz.<sup>3</sup>

The most famous name in contemporary existentially-oriented psychology is Irvin Yalom (who studied under May). His *Existential Psychotherapy* (Yalom, 1980) remains, to my knowledge, the only truly comprehensive textbook on the subject and, like several of the philosophers who have influenced him, he has also written fiction.<sup>4</sup> In Britain the current most influential institution is the Society for Existential Analysis that was founded by Emmy van Deurzen in London in 1988.<sup>5</sup>

In the second set of existential tendencies in contemporary psychology—theories and findings that are noticeably existential but which do not draw directly or at all from existential philosophy—there is a broadening of relevant subject matter. It is certainly the case that existentialist themes emerge in non-existential forms of psychotherapy, and within many of the other sub-disciplines such themes and ideas are evident. Examples include models of lifespan development (such as Gould's and Levinson's (Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978)); work within cognitive and social psychology on "cognitive dissonance," the "self-serving bias" and "depressive realism," and theorizing about the nature of emotions.<sup>6</sup>

Related to this point is a general willingness among existential philosophers and psychologist to draw on a wide range of material. Yalom, for instance, says that "the existential paradigm has a broad sweep: it gathers and harvests the insights of many philosophers, artists and therapists about the painful and redemptive consequences of confrontation with ultimate concerns." (1980, p. 486)<sup>7</sup> In other words, existentialism might be a relatively new and quite specific movement within philosophy and psychology, but existential concerns have always been around, and thus there are few limits on where and when they can show themselves.

The final form of the connection between psychology and existentialism—seemingly non-existential psychology in existential texts—will not receive as much attention over the course of this chapter, but there are three points I want to make here regarding this relation.

The first is that it is certainly true that a great deal of psychologizing goes on in existential philosophy. There are several reasons for this: firstly, questions about the self and about ethics are basic to its subject matter, and under most

philosophical banners it is relevant to both of these. Secondly, distinctive to its approach are not only subjectivity and an enticement towards individuality, but an analysis of why these aspects of existence tend to be avoided or forgotten. Existentialism is, in other words, interested in how and why fear and anxiety motivate us and these investigations will inevitably stray into psychological territory of less immediate relevance. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it deals with *concrete experience*. Put these together and you get questions like “Why, in terms of the lived experience of the individual, are questions like ‘how should I live?’ not fully addressed, and what does this tell us about human being?” Existential philosophers are looking for answers in terms of deep, universal, or necessary truths about the peculiarity of human existence, but the raw material they must work with in order to reach these answers is the concrete experience of the individual. Only through detailed consideration of human behavior and the conscious and unconscious motivations that lie behind it, can they hope to find clues as to the ways in which our basic metaphysical condition affects us. The ostensibly non-existential psychological insights and observations found in the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and so on are, then, likely to be instances of behavior that can readily, even if not directly, illuminate our existential condition.

The second point I want to make concerns a particular dichotomy in existential thinking—one that will be addressed later in the chapter—between models of the human condition that are developmentally sensitive, and those that are not. In brief, the former implies that existential awareness is something we have to grow towards and that the further we are from this awareness the less it can be said to be an influence upon us; while the latter implies that existential concerns can always be meaningfully construed as determinants of affect and behavior, no matter what our age or experience. For now the important point is that although the former might not be any more psychological than the latter, it tends to be psychological in ways that would be familiar to more than the existentially oriented. This, of course, could be a fluke—a result of categorical boundary-smudging in a time philosophers were psychologizing more liberally—but my feeling is that there is a close and predictable relation between these models and the different approaches to psychology they involve.

The last point concerns existential psychology’s status as a paradigm (as opposed, say, to a sub discipline). As a paradigm it presents many psychological phenomena in a light distinct from competing paradigms (e.g., evolutionary, psychoanalytic, cognitive). In this respect some of the psychological subject matter under consideration will have been explained in other ways, and, for the reader, might be *better* explained in other ways. (Sartre’s redescrptions of unconscious phenomena in his chapters on “bad faith” and “existential psychoanalysis” are good examples.<sup>8</sup>)<sup>9</sup>

Its scope is effectively spelt-out by Adrian van Kaam (1990). He stresses that existentialism is relevant to those levels of functioning that differentiate humans from “objects”—essentially intentionality. This means that in some areas of psychology—e.g., aspects of learning theory, animal psychology, and

physiological psychology—existentialism is not going to be treading on too many toes, but that in others—personality, emotions, social, and abnormal psychology and their developmental correlates—it is likely to be making claims which seek to usurp clearly competing paradigms (e.g., psychoanalysis), and keep others in their place (e.g., evolutionary theory). Along these latter lines van Kaam says “a central task of a comprehensive existential psychology is the discovery of existential constructs which can integrate the contributions of the various differential psychologies” (1990, p. 23) With respect to the issue of developmental sensitivity, this integration, as we shall see, sometimes just involves a mapping out of the psychological territory in light of the human being’s basic and necessary intentional awareness of itself *as* mortal, free, alone and absurd; and sometimes it involves seeing “differential” psychologies as representative of levels or stages on the way to this recognition.

In the remainder of the chapter I intend to address, in one form or another, all three of the ways in which I see existentialism and psychology meeting, though priority will, naturally, go to the first. To begin with I shall tackle existentialism’s basic themes and describe and analyze how the self is conceptualized in light of them; and then I shall consider the methodological dictates that arise from this conceptualization.

#### “FUNDAMENTAL CONCERNS” AND “EXISTENTIAL DIMENSIONS”

A list of typical themes and terms from existential philosophy would include alienation, freedom, death, despair, absurdity, anxiety, bad faith, and authenticity. In broad terms the existential psychologist is interested in the anxiety that is generated by basic features of human existence such as freedom and responsibility, death, contingency, and aloneness; the ways in which we attempt to deny this anxiety, and forms of life in which it is authentically integrated into a self that is vibrant, self-aware, committed and autonomous.

As mentioned, the most systematic account of the relation these existential themes have to psychology is Irvin Yalom’s *Existential Psychotherapy*. In this he outlines and analyses what he calls our “four ultimate concerns”—death, freedom (responsibility and willing), isolation, and meaninglessness.<sup>10</sup> Of these, and like Otto Rank, Paul Tillich, Norman O’ Brown and Ernest Becker,<sup>11</sup> he sees death as the most basic, but other writers, though pretty much agreeing on what the basic concerns are, order them differently. Martin Buber and Eric Fromm for instance see isolation from others as our basic source of anxiety; for Camus and Frankl it is meaninglessness, and for Sartre and Farber it’s freedom. These four are deeply interconnected which means that in order to analyze them you can start anywhere and sooner or later illuminate them all; but it can further be argued that they are incoherent as genuine existential concerns if treated in isolation from one another. What this then suggests is that there is an encompassing whole that they represent the parts of, but what is this whole? The short answer is conscious

human existence, and there might be no further reduction possible beyond this point. Less brief, but perhaps no less mysterious, is to say with Heidegger and others that human being is essentially “uncanny”—a form of being that condemns those fitting the description to being dissatisfied metaphysicians; to always be, in Thomas Nagel’s words, formulating more questions than answers can be provided to (Nagel, 1986, Ch. 11). I shall return to this matter at various points in this essay.

A less systematic psychological approach to existentialism is that of Emmy van Deurzen-Smith (For example, see van Deurzen-Smith, 1997, Ch. 18). The differences between her and Yalom (and other, particularly American, existential psychologists) are significant and I shall look more closely at these when I consider methodology, but certain similarities in the way she subdivides human existence provide further confirmation of common roots in the existential tradition. Specifically, she does not talk about “fundamental concerns” and their attendant anxieties, but more neutrally of “existential dimensions.” These she terms the “physical,” the “social,” the “psychological” and the “spiritual.” They refer to the individual’s embodiment, to her relation to others, her relation to herself and to the meaning of life as a whole. Yalom’s ultimate concerns clearly map onto these, but as we shall see, the work they do for him differs in some important respects to the work these dimensions do for van Deurzen-Smith.

In my summary of how existential philosophy has influenced psychological notions of the self I intend, ostensibly at least, to map-out the self with reference to these anxieties and the dimensions they represent. I do not, however, want to claim that there is a *primary* concern among those that Yalom lists and begin there; instead I want to follow the lead of a recent commentator on existential philosophy and say that the experience that makes best sense of all these concerns is uncanniness, or a sense of being “not at home.” At certain points my approach joins up with van Deurzen-Smith and other writers in underlining the deeply paradoxical nature of human existence (the reason, she claims, that her approach is genuinely existential and that Yalom’s is not).

The commentator in question is David E. Cooper, who in his “reconstruction” of existentialism claims that the principle concern that links philosophers tagged “existential” is *alienation*. It is not the sort of alienation that has come about only as a result of “recent historical circumstances” (World Wars, technology, dissolute middle classes, etc.); and it is not the sort that will be overcome by the inexorable unfolding of “Spirit” through history (Hegel), nor by changes in economic circumstances (Marx). Rather, it is an alienation brought about by inappropriate dualisms (e.g., mind and body, fact and value) that infect our world-view and which, in the beginning at least, need to be philosophized away (Cooper, 1990, pp. 31–36).

I agree that there is philosophical work to do here, but the manifestation of alienation of particular interest to psychologists is slightly different. We are, I believe, often alienated from ourselves, not only because of faulty world-views, but because the world the existentialists will have us accept—one where “the world . . . is indelibly human; and humans are indelibly worldly” (Cooper, 1990, p. 81)—is itself one where we struggle to feel at home in quite the way we might like to.

The process of acceptance is as much a personal one that takes commitment and courage as it is an intellectual, reflective one (which is partly why existentialism has caught the imagination of artists and psychologists as well as philosophers).

If we accept that some form of separation and “uncanniness” or “not-at-homeness”<sup>12</sup> is an inevitable part of the human condition we can see why some form of anxiety is also part of that condition. Indeed, one of the best accounts of homelessness and our responses to it is found in Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety*. His “psychologically orienting deliberation” uses religious categories like faith and sin, but in many respects the features of pre-religious existence he describes capture universal existential structures and experiences. In what Kierkegaard calls the “qualitative leap,” the forming individual recognizes his distance from the infinite through a profound subjective realization of his limitations as an embodied person. Deeply ignorant of their self and the world, and yet seeing that to have a self of any substance they must take responsibility for their finite (particularly sexual) nature and actions, the individual experiences a vertiginous insight that is at once a glimpse of the infinite and a sense of helplessness before it. Homelessness, in short, is for Kierkegaard the inevitable result of our being a “synthesis of the finite and the infinite,”<sup>13</sup> and, shorn of religious implications, something similar is being described by many or all existentialists. As well as Heidegger’s uncanniness, the human situation and the possibility of an authentic response to it throws up terms like “ambiguity” (Kierkegaard, de Beauvoir), dizziness (Kierkegaard, Camus), meta-stability (Sartre), insecurity (Tillich) and irony (Rorty). It is summarized by Merleau-Ponty in the following way:

Our birth . . . is the basis both of our activity and individuality, and our passivity or generality—that inner weakness which prevents us from ever achieving the density of the absolute individual. We are not in some incomprehensible way an activity joined to a passivity . . . but wholly active and wholly passive, because we are the upsurge of time. (1945/1979, p. 428)

It is for this reason then that anxiety is the favored choice for many existentialists for describing our primordial response to our condition. It is not the sort of anxiety that in itself can be alleviated, and nor should we seek to repress it. It is an anxiety that demands a response from us—to live authentically—and on-going attempts to deny its significance create forms of life that are in some sense stunted—Sartre’s “bad faith,” Tillich’s “unrealistic” self-affirmation, certitude and perfection (Tillich, 1952/1962, esp. Ch. 3), or Heidegger’s “they-self.”

At this point in the analysis psychology gets a clear foothold. Once a need, and thus a motivation, is in sight, human behavior can be investigated in terms of responses to this need. The four concerns can be linked in this way. Isolation from others makes us existentially anxious because relationships of all kinds can, on the one hand, create an illusion of canniness which satisfies our basic meta-physical craving; and on the other they can serve, in the moment, to obliterate that craving. Anxiety associated with individual freedom follows as nothing is more telling of our separateness from others than the recognition that only we can take

responsibility for our life and that in a critical sense we are the author of that life. In turn, avoidance of freedom's anxiety means our lives are not fully lived, and an absence of engagement or commitment is certainly a cause of lives felt to be meaningless and, as Norman O. Brown has observed (and many have agreed<sup>14</sup>), "the horror of death is the horror of dying with unlived lives in our bodies." (Yalom, 1980, p. 151)

Facing the source of anxiety, most would agree, does not disempower it, but it can alter the experiencing of it. After Heidegger, van Kaam says that for "the healthy person who is able to face and accept his contingency in openness, this anxiety is pervaded by a peaceful, humble acceptance of this aspect of human reality." (van Kaam, 1961, p. 211) This must be seen as a fundamental aim of existential therapy.

### OTHER PEOPLE

Unavoidably we live in a social world and unavoidably we are, in part, socially defined, but what is the existential relevance of other people? Two broad concerns arise from this—concerns tackled comprehensively by Sartre, Buber and Marcel. Firstly our "locus of control" with regard to freedom of many kinds including our self-definition; and secondly the temptation to use relations with others as a way of avoiding our freedom and uncanniness. This second I shall deal with under the next heading—"freedom, guilt, and death."

To resist being defined by others is healthy up to a point, but there is also a point where its inevitability must be accepted. In portraying human relations in *Being and Nothingness* as essentially involving conflict, Sartre is saying more than that we are always vulnerable to the restricting labels, moral condemnation and malicious gossip of others (subject matter familiar to social psychologists); he is saying that even with the best intentions relationships will become a battlefield. At bottom, what we find disturbing is the very truth that other people's views on us (and even their gaze on us) is something we cannot avoid or ignore.

Why don't we like it? One issue is mastery. The consciousness of another means that "the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being" (1966, p. 343)—in fact endless impenetrable holes that make our environment unpredictable and dangerous. But this is perhaps nothing more than an interpersonal problem—something that might create paranoia as well as moral and practical problems and the requirement for sensitivity in communication, theories of mind, empathy and a balance between suspicion and generosity.

Sartre's suggestion however is that we also find this state of affairs ontologically disturbing. Confronting other minds (whether it's someone's glance, a suspicious lover, or even the categorization implied by one's social identity) is a reminder of the fact that the world is intersubjective at its core: the meanings we live among are *human* meanings and that is all they could ever be. But why should this create anxiety? There are at least two reasons. The first is a pseudo-existential one—we are reminded of our smallness among all the many billions who have

lived and who will ever live. (This is not in itself a cause of anxiety or despair, rather, as Nagel, points out, it is the clash between this perspective, and an everyday one in which we take our pursuits very seriously, that we can find unsettling. (Nagel, 1979, Ch. 2)) The second is that an intersubjective world is not a *necessary* world with all the assured sense and purpose that that would seemingly bring with it. Perhaps both these sources of anxiety amount to the early Sartre's summation of the human condition as a "useless passion"—a hopeless "fundamental project" to be both creator and creation; like God, both free and necessary, and essentially impossible.

In *Being and Nothingness* (and other works) Sartre tells a naturalistic, often psychological, story alongside the philosophical one. The chapters on "being-for-others" in particular read more like case studies in pathological relationships than illustrations of necessary interpersonal dynamics that inevitably arise from our "situated" existence. This causes some quite serious interpretative problems, but the psychologist can be less concerned by these and let herself be informed about modes of behavior that might signify attempts to avoid existential anxiety. The situation Sartre presents is one in which to quell our uncanniness we either seek to dominate the other or allow them to subsume us. Both strategies seek a kind of immutability—the interpreting other is silenced or we lose ourselves in them—and both, even where the other's strategy is compatible, will necessarily fail.<sup>15</sup> These poles are of course extremes, and they demonstrate the distance we can go in flight from anxiety; but Sartre's message is also that as an essentially intersubjective self we can only ever be sliding towards one or the other. In the space between (say) two people, there can be no merging of consciousnesses and thus no neutral field where the real, essential me and the real essential you can freely graze. In fact the whole idea of real, essential personalities becomes non-sensical—something Walter Mischel's situationist critique of trait theory underlines. (See, for example, Mischel, 1968) The authentic individual recognizes this necessity and her resultant "meta-stability" and non-oppressive interaction with others Sartre investigates in a later work. (Sartre, 1983/1992).

Yalom lists a number of ways, some similar to Sartre, in which we seek to obliterate the anxiety caused by the rupture between ourselves and others (these include "existing in the eyes of others," "fusing" with others and sexual compulsivity (Yalom, 1980, pp. 378—391, 1991/1989, Chapters 1 and 2); and Sartre has famously influenced Laing's views on interpersonal relations. *Self and Others*, for example, includes accounts of the type of destructive pre-emptive spirals that are created when each party attempts to avoid the pain of objectification by first objectifying the other (see also *Knots*); and in *The Divided Self* Laing describes analogous fears on the part of the schizophrenic in terms of "engulfment" and "petrification" (Laing, 1968, Ch. 3, 1969, Ch. 3).

Much of the material written and cited by existential psychologists concerning authentic relations with others shares many, often commonsensical, views with differently oriented theorists. (Fromm, 1957, and humanistic psychologists like Maslow (1987, Ch. 12) and Rogers (1961/1967, Ch. 18) are mentioned often



enough.) By far the most influential existential philosopher in this regard though is Martin Buber. The distinction he draws between “I-thou” and “I-it” relationships expresses the difference between being truly present for another and engaging with them instrumentally—encountering them, deliberately or otherwise, from an individual’s particular point of view and on that individual’s terms. They are assimilated into pre-formed schemata and agendas that disallow the emergence of the “delicate,” naturally independent, and ultimately positive “between.” Indeed, what Buber seeks is more than the Kantian moral imperative of treating people as ends in themselves: he says,

When two men converse together, the psychological is certainly an important part of the situation, as each listens and each prepares to speak. Yet this is only the hidden accompaniment to the conversation itself . . . whose meaning is to be found neither in one of the two partners nor in both together, but only in the dialogue itself, in the ‘between’ in which they live together. (Wheway, 1999, p. 123)

Buber stresses the primacy of intersubjectivity (“in the beginning is the relation” (Buber, 1922/1970, p. 69)) and his ideas on therapeutic practice have had the greatest impact on psychology. (See especially Buber, 1947) “Dialogical therapy” (Friedman, 1989; Wheway, 1999) emerged directly from his work, and existential therapists, including Yalom and van Deurzen Smith, often cite his influence.

Just how dialogue heals I shall say more about under “methodology,” but for now there is a crucial existential twist to add to the authentic intersubjective picture. Something that is less of an issue for Buber, but critical for many existentialists, is the matter of the tension created between the need to sustain individuality and the development of the potential of our (necessary) relations with others. Important analyses and remarks on this have come from Kierkegaard (notably 1843/1985, 1842/1987), Heidegger (1926/1990, especially Division Two, pt. IV), de Unamuno (1912/1954), Marcel (1949, 1951), Sartre (1983/1992) and de Beauvoir (1948/1994); and Cooper (1990) provides an incisive summary of how the problem can, in part, be solved. The essence of this position is that since our measure of ourselves is inextricably linked to how others view us, a requirement of our maintaining our authenticity is that we help maintain authenticity in others:

an authentic understanding of myself as freedom . . . requires me to view others as possessed of this same kind of existence. Unless I so view them, I cannot expect them to view me in that manner. Only if I regard and treat others—or better, regard them *through* treating them—as loci of existential freedom, will I receive back an image of myself as just such a locus. (1990, p. 189)

Different authors have different thoughts on how this is to be achieved and on how far one should go in one’s attempts to achieve it. Kierkegaard, for instance, has said that “the most resigned a human being can be is to acknowledge the given independence in every human being, and to the best of one’s ability do everything in order to truly help someone retain it” (1846/1992, p. 260); and de Unamuno that “true charity is a kind of invasion . . . it is to awaken . . . uneasiness and torment of

the spirit.” (1954, p. 282) More aggressive forms of therapy like that developed by Ellis (“Rational Emotive Therapy”) might fit de Unamuno’s bill, but gentler contrivances can be found in therapeutic literature. Richard Hycner, for instance, distinguishes between I-thou “moments” and I-thou “processes”—the latter being “purposive intervention which, conducted respectfully, support the conditions for I-thou moments to occur.” (Whewey, 1999, p. 114) It may not be quite this that Hycner has in mind, but in his play *Emergency*, where a psychiatrist in need of help but refusing to seek it is therapized indirectly by another psychiatrist pretending to be his patient, Helmuth Kaiser demonstrates the sort of imaginative intervention existential analysts would not automatically dismiss. (Yalom, 1980, p. 253)<sup>16</sup>

As said, in non-professional relationships existentialists’ views on authentic love are not radically different from other paradigms.<sup>17</sup> The person truly in love will do all they can to abet the other to be all they can be—they are thus absolutely *for* them but not absolutely *with* them except in *necessarily* impermanent I-thou moments. Their reality and value is often not in question, but the true existential significance of such occurrences lies in what surrounds them. Through bravely confronting our uncanniness and not seeking refuge in, or power from, the other, we are better able to create and discern genuine I-thou moments and I-thou relationships. These are good *in themselves*, but of equal (or greater) value is individual freedom. Fortunately these are mutually supporting goods, and since the former can only arise indirectly the individual should be committed to their own authenticity and, sometimes through I-it style contrivances that do not directly infringe on the others’ self-determination, the authenticity of the other.

### FREEDOM, GUILT, DEATH

Avoidance of freedom causes guilt, and guilt causes further avoidance of freedom. Why are we guilty, according to the existentialist? Because we have not taken a grip of our lives and fashioned them creatively in terms of the meanings that encircle the “narrative center of gravity”<sup>18</sup> that is our particular self. Using Virginia Woolf’s metaphor, we have too often looked the other way as the drops of self continually form and fall (Woolf, 1931/1977). That is one source of guilt, but not the only one and not, I would say, the most clearly existential one.

This other I will come to in the section headed “meaning and absurdity,” and for now I will consider this first source of guilt. Existential psychology is concerned with “potential,” but it needs to be careful identifying what kind of potential this is. Clearly it is not a given nature or set of characteristics or traits that we need to “actualize.” When Maslow says we strive (or should strive) “to be all we can be” (1954/1987, p. 22) he is not being quite the essentialist the slogan suggests, but that he would use it at all is nevertheless an indicator of a divergence in the existential and humanistic paradigms.

For the existentialist potential generally means the potential to see ourselves as free in the relevant senses, as opposed to, say, a mere synthesis of biological determinants and environmental conditioning. Similarly, just as Nietzsche attacked

what he saw as oppressive Christian morality, so the modern existential psychologist rails against the individual conceived of as the hapless victim of immature (e.g., Oedipal) guilt. The question for the psychologist though is how the individual is supposed to achieve freedom. On the face of it responsibility and authentic relations with others are hard won, but why is it so hard? and to what extent is it itself an act of will?

The traditional morality closest to the existential orientation is virtue theory. This is because certain virtues like courage and commitment seem necessary in order to achieve one's "existential potential." Thus facing our anxiety and living authentically require, indirectly, the development of character strength.

Relevant here is Leslie Farber's "two realms of the will." Decisions rationally worked through and conscious efforts of will comprise the second realm, but choice, of such importance to the existentialist, is not always conscious. This for Sartre would be a dissatisfying state of affairs, a culture suited to bad faith, but for Farber (and tacitly or otherwise for many existential philosophers) it is of vital importance. His point is that meaningful changes of lifestyle and personality often needs cultivating in advance. Small, authentically motivated, alterations of habit combined with moments of self-reflection and rational thought will work subintentionally towards that change. The individual may well be unaware of just how much is going on until confronted by a circumstance that tests them. Then, without any need for a "dead heave of the will,"<sup>19</sup> they act in such a way that reveals, retrospectively, how different they have become. "I can will knowledge, but not wisdom" says Farber, "self-assertion . . . but not courage." (Yalom, 1980, p. 299) A process like this is existential and authentic because the force behind it has been the individual's determination to change themselves and/or their world-view; the existentialist can accept without contradiction the oil tanker nature of character and habit so long as she believes change, freely desired, is possible (Farber, 1966).<sup>20</sup>

That there are polarities within existential psychology with regard to the exact relation character strength has to existential authenticity is revealing in more ways than one. A simple way to express the nature of these poles is in terms of the question: Is authenticity to be equated with character strength, or is character strength a necessary prerequisite for authenticity? The former implies that character development is hindered only, or primarily by existential anxiety; the latter that it can be hindered by (potentially many) layers of other factors before it has to encounter existential concerns. Yalom steers towards the former: death anxiety in his account of our condition playing a not dissimilar role to the libido in Freud's. From an early age, he claims, children are in denial of death (1980, Ch. 3), and like Tillich (1952/1962),<sup>21</sup> he sees most of our adult neuroses as having a similar origin. Symptoms exhibited work for the patient either by confirming their "specialness" or the existence of an "ultimate rescuer." (Yalom, 1980, Ch. 4)

Two criticisms that can be leveled at Yalom are these: first, even if death anxiety is in some sense basic, it is not necessarily always an *existential* anxiety. By his own admission death anxiety in adults is mitigated by a meaningful life,<sup>22</sup> but until adolescence at least, children presumably do not conceive of their lives

in quite this way. If we also assume issues of isolation and freedom are also not existentially flavored for them, then can the death anxiety that does exist really be of the order he wants it to be? This criticism applies to adult fears of death as well. Death, I accept, provokes an anxiety like no other, but I am not convinced that, by itself, it is a truly existential anxiety. Thoughts of our own death, I suggest, provoke a primordial terror; one that if we try to rationalize it creates something we might call anxiety, but not for the reasons the other “ultimate concerns” do (i.e., our inherent ontological instability), but because, as Tillich would say, of the *ungraspable* nature of our non-existence. “It isn’t *natural* to die,” says a character in Sartre’s story *The Wall*; “man has invented death” says Yeats (*Death* (1974, p. 142)).

Death’s existential significance should perhaps be sought elsewhere. I’ve mentioned its relation to one sense of a life lacking meaning (fear of it is all the more acute when we feel our lives have not been lived to the full); but it also provides a potent reminder that life is not the sort of thing that can have the kind of overall, externally ordained purpose and plan we might yearn for. Death does not come at a time when we have done all we can do and completed our task (or perhaps our selves), not because we have limited control over when it comes, or even because it *must* come, but because, as Rorty (1989, p. 42) says, “there’s nothing to complete.” A life is not like a jigsaw puzzle or a mathematical equation. Relatedly, what is death if not the ultimate separation? On the one hand it’s a fundamental part of our constitution and yet something that we have little control over; and on the other it’s something we must do alone.

If I am right and it is this context that makes death an existential concern, then Yalom and other theorists need to show that this context is present even from an early *adult* age. This is the second criticism and it takes us in the direction of the opposite pole to Yalom’s reductionism. It is not clear that our anxieties become anything like existential until we have matured and explored ourselves and our world. They might, firstly, be present but vague; and secondly the existence of the features of existence that give rise to existential concerns may well be metaphysically woven to the types of situations that do cause us concern, but this is far from claiming that we are always, consciously or unconsciously, existentially oriented. In the first instance we might, for example, intellectually grasp life’s absurdity after reading *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but our maturity and life circumstances might be such that we are far from ripe for it to have “heat” (to paraphrase William James). In the second, it is a truism to say that if it were not for our freedom and isolation from others there would not be relationship crises, but this does not mean that the relevant people are, or even could be, aware of the role they play.

My point is that there are other, more or less self-contained realms of concern that are in an important sense incommensurable with full-blown existential concerns. I will, though, immediately qualify this in the following way: these could (and I believe they do) form something like a hierarchy (maybe, traditional criticisms notwithstanding, akin to Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs”) with existential

awareness somewhere near the top.<sup>23</sup> When and if the hierarchy is climbed (and I would also say there is something like an existential gravitational drag that forces us to do so) nothing on the lower rungs will look the same again unless understanding is repressed. Crucially then, this polarity is not saying that existential concerns and our methods of denying them are key shapers of personality and pathology from the ground up; they are key shapers only when life has taught us enough for the whites of their eyes to be in view. Once seen we then have the power to re-assess much of what has gone before (hence, in part, the value of existential therapy for adults), but until seen, until life's uncanniness seeps far enough in to color our predominant world-views, it makes no sense for it to serve as the fundamental psychological paradigm.

If I am reading her correctly, van Deurzen Smith is closer to this "developmental" pole (there is more on this aspect of her approach below), and the naturalistic aspects of Nietzsche and, in particular, Kierkegaard seem to fit this picture (notably Kierkegaard's "stages on life's way"—the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious<sup>24</sup>). It is here also that we can locate a cross-over with models of lifespan development that have been formulated since Erikson in the 1950s (for example, Erikson, 1950) and particularly over the last thirty years (for example, Levinson, 1978). The "static" model on the other hand, at least with regard to adulthood, is closer to Heidegger and Sartre. (With the overtly psychological Sartre, the absence of developmental considerations is, I think, conspicuous.)

### AUTHENTICITY AND INTEGRITY

Since authenticity is on the one the hand existential-knowledge and acceptance and on the other self-knowledge and acceptance (as conditioned by existential knowledge), then the criticisms and detailed descriptions of modes of self-deception found in existential literature are to be expected.<sup>25</sup> Almost invariably the message is to face ourselves and our existence bravely and resolutely and not shirk any of its truths or demands.

Avoidance of our "being," like avoidance of internal conflicts in psychoanalytic theory, elicits metaphors like rigidity and inflexibility.<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche's "four errors," Laing's schizoid retreat, the "neatly drawn map" of Hesse's "pseudo-world," William James' instinct to "absolutize," Tillich's "unrealistic certitude" and Kundera's "kitsch" are examples.<sup>27</sup> Many (notably James and Heidegger) accept that some kind of pure and continuous existential awareness is not possible, but all seem to agree that for one's boundaries to be drawn up in a particular way for too long a time is a sign of inauthenticity. (In the next section I will describe in more detail a particular type of flexibility the existentialist demands of us.)

Where a more static psychology is implied (as with Sartre), avoidance of this primarily involves an act of will like Farber's second "realm"; but where a developmental model is implied the picture is both more complex and more compatible with a "psychological realism." Alexander Nehamas (Nehamas, 1985), commenting

on Nietzsche, describes a version of authentic integration that would, in spirit at least, be accepted by many personality and clinical theorists:

A self is just a set of coherently connected episodes, and an admirable self, as Nietzsche insists again and again, consists of a large number of powerful and conflicting tendencies that are controlled and harmonized. Coherence, of course, can also be produced by weakness, mediocrity, and one-dimensionality. But style . . . involves controlled multiplicity and resolved conflict. (1985, p. 188)<sup>28</sup>

Inextricable from the Nietzschean ideal is a courageous existential awareness—the power to affirm “all that is questionable and terrible in existence” (1968, p. 39)—not made apparent in this quote. Despite unresolved methodological and theoretical questions regarding the locating of this person in his general psychology, many of the important features of this ideal are found in Maslow’s descriptions of “self-actualizers.” For instance:

Our healthy individuals find it possible to accept themselves and their own nature without chagrin or complaint . . . They can accept their own human nature with all its discrepancies from the ideal image without feeling real concern [but] it would convey the wrong impression to say that they are self-satisfied. (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 196)

And one commentator on Maslow has said,

Perhaps the most universal characteristic of these . . . people is their unusual ability to perceive other people correctly and efficiently, to see reality *as it is* rather than *as they wish it to be*. They have a better perception of reality and more comfortable relations with it . . . [they are] able to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty more easily than others. (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1981, p. 388)

An attempt to discredit this aspect of mental health has emerged from research into learned helplessness and attributional styles during the 1970s and 1980s. Some of the findings culminated in a paper by Taylor and Brown (1988) that made the claim that realistic perceptions are detrimental rather than basic to healthy mental functioning. Examining the vast amount of research into our “self-serving bias,” including evidence that the attributional styles of depressives are significantly more realistic than those of nondepressives (in terms of their assessment of how much control they have over events, degree of optimism about the future, and how popular, talented, etc. they are), they concluded that “the capacity to develop and maintain positive illusions may be thought of as a valuable human resource to be nurtured and promoted.” (p. 193)<sup>29</sup>

There are many criticisms—both conceptual and concerning external validity—that can be made of this paper and the research that preceded it, but I will mention just a couple here.<sup>30</sup> Firstly, it is not the case that *all* non-depressives are overly-optimistic, so what are we to make of those who have slipped through the statistical net? Relatedly, the claim here is not that realism *causes* depression, but that realistic people tend to be depressed and optimistic people tend not to be. Even though some research does suggest an absence of positive illusions is a significant

predictor of depression, some of the statistics Taylor and Brown base their claim around can be accounted for by reversing this causal process, and equally, one assumes this can be done with the optimistic group. Factor this in and it could leave us with a far weaker pattern of results and greater reason for suggesting that there are plenty of people whose realism has not caused mental health problems.

My second point is that not enough account is taken of the distinction between short-term defensive devices and more detached, long-term self-perceptions. This is particularly relevant to the types of competitive laboratory tests often employed to study perceptions of control; tests that are often only paying attention to subjects' immediate responses and then under somewhat peculiar conditions.<sup>31</sup>

Both these points underline something seemingly crucial to the whole business of authenticity: it may well be that plenty of us employ a self-serving bias to keep ourselves buoyant, but then this is not surprising if we accept that it is extremely tough to achieve authenticity. There may be a great deal to come to terms with before we can afford to maintain a consistently accurate appraisal of our averageness. More to the point, perhaps only by struggling towards an existential perspective can we amass enough of the right kind of objectivity to forgive ourselves our failings and be less concerned about the relative abilities and judgments of others. The preceding implies a developmental model (and in this respect the degree to which students are relied upon as subjects in these studies is bothersome<sup>32</sup>), but it also implies that Sartrean acts of good faith (in one sense of the term) and Heideggerian moments of anxiety and resoluteness are themselves vital parts of the developmental process. What it *also* implies is that there are going to be times on route to authenticity where things seem confused, odd and dangerous, and perhaps it is no wonder that the "journey" metaphor is not an uncommon one in existential philosophy, literature and psychology.<sup>33</sup>

My point is that existential philosophers have rarely made any bones about how difficult authenticity is, and if we accept that a courageous attitude towards the "ultimate concerns" is inextricably linked to a courageous attitude towards our limitations as social, embodied selves and to the chanciness of life, then it should come as no surprise that the studies in question have not uncovered many non-depressed realists.

### MEANING AND ABSURDITY

Sometimes when existential psychologists talk about meaning they are referring to how fulfilling a particular person's life is—in an important sense, how *happy* they are. Yalom, for instance, lists eight "secular activities that provide human beings with a sense of life purpose" (1980, p. 431), including altruism, dedication to a cause, creativity, and self-transcendence, but agrees with Viktor Frankl (and Aristotle) that happiness itself is not something that can be pursued directly.

The critical idea is *engagement*, and all the time we are estranged from our day to day activities this is absent. Engagement's relation to meaning is two-fold: one is the energy with which we pursue something. Focus, concentration and effort

take us out of ourselves (or at least solipsistic versions of being “in” ourselves) and facilitate the type of interaction with the world familiar to Zen Buddhists<sup>34</sup> and analogous to Buber’s ideal relation to others. Frankl’s logotherapist (“meaning-centered” psychotherapist) is “in the first place . . . concerned with the potential meaning inherent and dormant in all the single situations one has to face throughout his or her life.” (Frankl, 1959/1984, p. 168) The existential guilt discussed above arises through the individual not engaging with, and thus not making the most of and learning from circumstances they find themselves in, including tragic ones. The process is self-sustaining: the less we engage the less we learn about what we do and do not value and thus the more we remain in ill-fitting situations (jobs, relationships). This creates more guilt which through our working at avoiding it makes us increasingly neurotic or “hardened”; the hardening means we authentically engage even less with our circumstance and so on.

The second relation is, then, the nature of the activity itself; it must either be something worth doing for its own sake or with such an end (maybe distant in time) clearly in mind. Yalom’s list amounts to aspects of life that we tend to find valuable in this way—often pursuits in clear contrast to the typical Western wealth-pursuing grind—but there are endless activities that have the potential to be meaningful in themselves.<sup>35</sup> Meaning, in this respect, depends on the person, and in particular it might depend on where that person is developmentally. Broad ideas like “creativity” and “commitment” are qualities individuals can find in many different places and often the most a therapist can do is make suggestions arrived at through getting to know the person in ways they don’t quite know (or have forgotten) themselves. Quite often certain stereotypically meaningful or noble pursuits just don’t move us, and if they do they might only be central to our lives for a limited amount of time. The point is that (1) as individuals the passion and commitment expressed in our engagements is crucial; (2) different activities are not all equally worth pursuing (but in part this can only be discovered through committing to them); (3) the criteria for what is worthwhile are strongly dependent on the individual in question.

Frankl speaks of three “avenues” to meaning: work (or “deeds”), other people, and self-transcendence in terms of one’s attitude to one’s fate. The first two are tied in with the type of meaning just discussed, but the third is somewhat different and I would say more distinctly existential. As well as the limitations of our interactions with others, Sartre and others make it clear that we can neither be identified with our social roles nor with what we create (however necessary and important these are). Frankl says,

we cannot understand the whole film without having first understood each of its components . . . Isn’t it the same with life? Doesn’t the final meaning of life, too, reveal itself, if at all, only at its end, on the verge of death? And doesn’t this final meaning, too, depend on whether or not the potential meaning of each single situation has been actualized to the best of the respective individual’s knowledge and belief? (1984, p. 168)



If we have been engaged with our lives' bigger patterns, meanings are likely to emerge as we get older, and death can in that respect be happy or guilt free. But the existentialist is also saying that there cannot be a "final meaning"—that it's artificial when books and films offer one. In this respect life is "meaningless," but only in a way in which we cannot truly make sense of what "meaningful" could mean except through necessarily vague references to art and god.

Just what is disturbing about life, our lives "as a whole," is expressed to some extent by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but I believe is best captured by philosopher Thomas Nagel (1979, Ch. 2, 1986, Ch. 11). He conceptualizes any rational creature in terms of a polarity of subjective and objective points of view. The subjective is importantly defined in terms of its values, passions and engagements; the objective is impersonal and can view these pursuits from varying degrees of detachment. Epistemologically we can of course never entirely leave our subjectivity, but we can go far enough to take fairly objective stock of our emotional life and particular commitments. It is from this point of view that they seem relatively small and arbitrary but, because emotional categories do not apply here, this does not induce a sense of despair. What it does reveal is the oddity of this duality, and the "absurdity" of life refers not to its absence of metaphysical meaning, but to the fact that being able to take this point of view does not alter our level of commitment to our arbitrary lives.<sup>36</sup>

Problems arise, existentially speaking, because the same faculty that allows us a detached point of view is manifest in the practical reason we use in our day to day lives. Through engagement we learn about specific situations with their own internal sense and value structures, but as we have seen, key to the existential importance of engagement is that it provides us with leverage to accept or reject commitments in light of who we take ourselves to be. Authenticity thus requires reasoned detachment, but there is nothing to stop this reasoned detachment climbing (maybe rocketing) towards a profoundly objective point of view whereby life choices can no longer be grounded in self-justifying projects. The purest meaning of existential anxiety is I believe this—that the more committed we are to our lives the more exposed we are to a point of view that is in conflict with the nature of this commitment.

In existential philosophy and psychology there are various ways in which this pure sense of anxiety is manifest, and often (and often misleadingly) this is referred to as "guilt." One is the reluctance we can have to committing ourselves to someone or something because of an awareness that other, potentially as or more rewarding, alternatives have to be foregone. In Heidegger's words, "freedom . . . is only in the choice of one possibility . . . in tolerating one's not having chosen the others and not being able to choose them." (1926/1990, p. 331) Prevarication and avoidance of conscious choice-making is often a temptation, but the dictates of freedom and authenticity only offer us a stark choice between forgoing autonomy and dignity or committing and taking responsibility even when ignorant and unsure.

Impulsiveness is another way of attempting to defuse this type of "guilt"—something that is itself facilitated by what Yalom calls "sequential

ambivalence”—experiencing one desire and then the other and acting upon (or internally opting for) the one that is currently in the foreground. The case study of Mabel who, though in love with her husband, falls for another man, is instructive (and a not dissimilar hypothetical example is used by Flanagan in his essay *Self Confidences* (1996)). She is caught in a cycle of sequential ambivalence that (seeing the clear advantages of one, then the other), though it alleviates anxiety in the short-term, does not provide the opportunity to make the kind of choice she needs to make. Yalom says,

The therapist's task is to help the impulsive patient turn sequential ambivalence into simultaneous ambivalence. The experiencing of conflicting wishes sequentially is a method of defending oneself from anxiety. When one fully experiences conflicting wishes *simultaneously*, one must face the responsibility of choosing one and relinquishing the other. (1980, p. 313)

He admits in the same passage that “simultaneous ambivalence results in a state of extreme discomfort,” but is optimistic about the benefits of facing it. “Creative” solutions might emerge that in a sense solve the problem,<sup>37</sup> but not always, and in many cases we have to always live with thoughts of what “could have been.” How to deal with this? Studies in “post-decisional” cognitive dissonance demonstrate our tendency to denigrate unchosen alternatives once we have acted, and this perhaps has to be seen as psychologically pragmatic.<sup>38</sup> However, what should not be ignored from an existential point of view is this necessarily tragic feature of life.

A further manifestation is a situation that was alluded to earlier. Until we commit we do not know, but through committing we are eating away at our own limited time, and weaving our way, often deeply, into the lives of others. The blade is twisted by the requirement that we then take responsibility for these choices, even though in many cases we do not and cannot know where they will take us (and other people<sup>39</sup>). This is particularly true of the adolescent and the young adult; people viewed by society as more or less responsible, but with limited experience. Not only will they not tend to be good at predicting the consequences of their actions, they will not be alive to the full *meaning* of those actions. (For example, what does a legal career mean to the 21-year-old graduate?; what does love mean to the 17-year-old engaged to be married?)<sup>40</sup> We can will authentically and with only good intentions, but there cannot be a guarantee that the results will be good and when they are not, the locus of responsibility still lies with us.

This problem is intractable and is a version of one of the oldest stories told in the existential canon—the “fall” (see Kierkegaard, 1944/1980). Adam's sting was that he could only discover the meaning of right and wrong by *doing* wrong, and so by the time its full force becomes known to him he has, of necessity, already sinned.<sup>41</sup> Existential interpretations of the story of Oedipus salvage it from Freud's narrow interpretation and refloat it in the realm of “the individual's struggles with his fate, in self-knowledge and self-consciousness.” (May in Hoeller, 1990, p. 170)

Emmy van Deurzen-Smith cites Heidegger's challenge to Oedipus (in *Introduction to Metaphysics*) of "achieving authenticity in the light of the tragic givens of his life", for, she says, "what is overwhelmingly tragic, is not that he desires his mother and wants to kill his father, but that he has committed all these ignominies whilst believing himself to be doing all the right things." (1997, pp. 182–183) The point is that though doing wrong is an unavoidable part of our condition, we must nevertheless take up these wrongs as our own, take responsibility for them, or else forfeit having a self at all. The self, good and bad, is in many ways a matter of luck, but this luck is the only material we have to work with in order to *fashion* a self.

For the most part what we are not permitted is to choose which aspects of our past go into the mix (only the pouring and shaping of that mix), but youth and experience *are* to some extent mitigating circumstances, and it is the therapist's job to sift authentic guilt from excessive and damaging self blame. The balance required is similar to Yalom's "simultaneous ambivalence"—what we find toughest to endure is not the darkness of death nor the absence of God, but the ambiguities inherent in our freedom and isolation, the necessary lack of stability. Our hardest job, existentially speaking, is to endure meta-stability, be "half-sure and whole hearted,"<sup>42</sup> a "confident-unconfident." (Flanagan, 1996) When it comes to taking responsibility for our past we need not only to avoid the temptations of flippant dissociation and ungenerous self-loathing, but recognize also the nature of existence such that there can be no firm resolutions to such problems.

In general the existentialists' emphasis on the link between emotion and the self is understandable for several reasons. First, the disruptive nature of emotions makes one's cares—what one loves and fears—apparent and vivid. As the "patterns of salience" (de Sousa, in Rorty, 1980) in our lives gain heat, so events gain texture and contour and it is harder to avoid the concrete significance of the decisions we make. Second, in an important sense we are assailed by our emotions; they *happen to us* and can take us by surprise. In this way they are perhaps the most pronounced reminder of our engaged, 'thrown', matter of fact relationship with what is and is not significant for us. Similarly, and thirdly, the physiological and expressive components serve as reminders of our inescapable embodiment; and fourthly, any reflective investigation of the complexities of an emotional episode will reveal the *particularity* of our history, hopes and desires. The particular emotions and moods that existentialists pay attention to—anxiety, guilt, love—are those which capture the *objective* nature of human being in a way that it becomes of deep relevance and concern *for this particular human being*.<sup>43</sup>

"Appraisal" oriented psychologists like Magda Arnold, Nico Frijda and Keith Oatley,<sup>44</sup> as well as philosophers like Nussbaum (1990, 2002), Solomon (1976/1993) and de Sousa (1980) explain the significance of emotions in similar ways. Even neurologically oriented research (for example, Antonio Damasio (1994, 1999/2000)) seems to have features in common with Heidegger's notion of "attunement" (*Befindlichkeit*).<sup>45</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

How, according to existential philosophy should people be studied? Immediately it needs to be said that even though some existential psychologists carry out and refer to one or other form of empirical research, all recognize that the important thing is to *change* people and that even though change can only be engendered by insight, that insight has, in a critical sense, to be the *subject's own*. The basic tenets of existentialism are there in the philosophy (with psychologists of course diverging in their responses to, and appropriation of the different biases of these philosophers) and the primary methodological questions concern when and how to *communicate* these insights.

Vital to understanding the existentialist's approach to understanding and handling people is the notion of *subjectivity*. Subjectivity has two important but distinct meanings in existentialism. The first is what Kierkegaard has called "truth as subjectivity"<sup>46</sup> and concerns the *depth and quality* of an individual's grasp of an objective truth. This is what Rollo May is driving at when he describes the purpose of therapy being that "the patient experience his own existence as real." (van Deurzen-Smith, 1997, p. 157)

The second is a more radical reminder of a basic premise of existential phenomenology—that all constructs and values are *human* constructs and values. Scientific truths are not the last call on "reality," these truths are *ideas*, and ideas are found solely in (or between) minds. The correspondence of these ideas with "reality" is not what matters, because even if we accept the special meaning of scientific truths as opposed to, say, moral truths, the situation we find ourselves with is one where, existentially phenomenologically speaking, *all* ideas are on an equal footing. And what this means is that the way the various features of existence are understood, composed, ordered and prioritized by a given culture or a given individual (and indeed which features figure in the first place) is dependent upon nothing other than the history of that culture or individual. Within the boundaries of our imagination the possibilities are limitless, and we can see that there are forms of life we can't, from our historical and cultural positioning, even begin to imagine.

These two meanings of subjectivity give rise, as you would imagine, to two distinct features of existential therapy. (Although these of course are not independent of one another: firstly, among the aspects of existence the individual has to subjectively appropriate is the idea that they are in a crucial sense nothing more than their interpretations and so they cannot expect therapists and theorists to provide answers; and secondly, although they are "free" in this sense there are nonetheless certain things which are unnegotiable such as this freedom itself and the requirement of subjective appropriation.)

First I shall deal with truth as subjectivity. Telling people about the ultimate concerns and the existential dimensions will not, for the most part, make much difference. For this reason empirical research is unhelpful (although it might be helpful for other reasons): what is instead needed are techniques that encourage

the individual to understand for themselves the significance of their existential condition.

The same applies to existential philosophy. To an extent what these philosophers are saying is not difficult, and nor is it contentious except perhaps with regard to *how much* existential concerns matter to an individual life. When on occasion Kierkegaard or Nietzsche seem to be over-stating the obvious they are not trying to inform the “reader as philosopher” of anything, but rather motivate the reader as “an existing indiv.” towards greater authenticity. This is why something that can be formally stated quite quickly and simply is told and re-told in the form of fables, anecdotes, diary extracts, literary analysis and so on. This, as in the case of Kierkegaard, might be over the course of one volume (e.g., *Fear and Trembling*’s many re-workings of the story of Abraham and Isaac), or it might involve themes spelt-out analytically in one book and demonstrated via stories in others (e.g., Camus’ linking of his theoretical works like *The Myth of Sisyphus* with novels and plays like *The Outsider* and *Caligula*; and features of Sartre’s philosophy such as bad faith, commitment and desire in *Being and Nothingness* given greater life and relevance in *Nausea*, *Dirty Hands*, *The Age of Reason*, etc.). The point is that in order to have the desired effect, the concerns existentialists consider to be basic to human life must be communicated *indirectly*.

In terms of therapeutic approach this necessitates a departure from psychoanalysis. That reflective understanding of the problem is not itself enough—that everyone must *practice* new ways of seeing and living in order to make deep and lasting changes—is not a unique insight of existential psychology. But there is a profound difference in the manner they seek to achieve this, in particular in the way that existential therapists play down the importance of transference and seek to engender a more “real” relationship with the patient in the therapeutic setting. “It is” says Yalom “the relationship that heals” and he cites what is now quite well-known evidence that results are produced in therapy when this relationship is warm and empathetic as well as non-judgmental and accurate (1980, p. 401). Existential extensions of this idea include the therapist serving as a model for the patient in terms of their own (authentic) approach to themselves and to the therapeutic relation, and this can (or should?) involve them being quite candid about their failings. Such candidness prevents the patient feeling that authenticity requires super-human capacities, and also makes them less likely to overstep the boundaries of the relationship and try to off-load inappropriate responsibility onto the therapist.<sup>47</sup>

Existential therapists are generally suspicious of therapeutic “techniques,” believing these to impede the spontaneity of the encounter. Few though would go as far as Thomas Szasz when he says that “the relationship . . . must be as natural . . . and unrehearsed as is the relationship between other persons who respect . . . each other” (in Hoeller, 1990, pp. 16–17); and few would use as many techniques as Yalom.<sup>48</sup> His emphasis on the virtues of group therapy as a chance for patients to, among other things, view their problematic interpersonal tendencies in vivo is less of a technique and squares well with many existential aims and assumptions.

Where the departure is more radical is in terms of the *types* of insight existentialists are after and just how these can be appropriated. The ultimate concerns, as far as they are existential, are abstract and difficult to maintain a grip on within the messiness of everyday life, and yet they need to become anything but that in order to make any difference. Worse still, even in its abstract form *the* ultimate concern of alienation seems virtually impossible to ride for any length of time. To at once belong and not belong in the world;<sup>49</sup> to be both a subjective point of view and an objective point of view, to “have to deal with human reality as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is” (1966, p. 100) is an affront to practical reason, and even if we have the courage to endure the vertigo, direct engagement either with pure reflection or with practical reason in everyday life means we slip from the “dizzying crest” (Camus, 1941/1975, p. 50).

This inherent openness is translated by the existential psychologist into a respect for the individual’s point of view. How this cashes out is not simple though and different theorist and therapists have treated it differently. Few are likely to regard the individual’s private world as unnegotiable, and in practice no therapist can regard it this way (it is after all in some sense “not working” for the patient); but a dogmatic and scientific account of conscious and unconscious processes such as Freud’s has to be rejected. The therapist must, in a deep sense, treat each case on its own terms, and always be prepared for surprises.<sup>50</sup>

Sartre (1943/1966, p. 716), writing on “existential psychoanalysis” says,

What we are demanding then . . . is a *veritable* irreducible: that is, an irreducible of which the irreducibility would be self-evident, which would not be presented as the postulate of the psychologist.

The patient’s account of her self and her relation to others might be confused and incoherent, but it is for the therapist to clean it up and “reframe” it rather than impose explanatory systems that bear no resemblance to the patient’s world-view. As such a key ability of an existential analyst is flexibility, itself the product not of understanding a complex theory of the mind but of “having a rich and varied life” (van Deurzen-Smith, 1997, p. 220).

The existential psychotherapist has as [her] primary task to recognize together with the client the specific tensions that are at work in the client’s life. This requires a process of careful scrutiny and description of the client’s experience and a gradually growing familiarity with the client’s particular situation and stance in the world. To understand the worldview and the states of mind that this generates is to grapple with the way the client makes meaning, which involves a coming to know clients’ values and beliefs. The particular circumstances of the client’s life are recognized, as is their wider context. The psychotherapeutic process of existential therapy is then to elicit, clarify and put into perspective all the current issues and contradictions that are problematic (van Deurzen-Smith, 1999, p. 232).

The “perspective” into which these issues are put are the basic existential concerns or dimensions, and the work these do for the patient or “client” depends on the

theorist in question. No paradigm or approach is assumption-free and we have seen what existential psychologists tend to treat as given. There are disagreements though, and in particular the one which is exemplified by the divergent approaches of Yalom and van Deurzen-Smith. Yalom, as we have seen, is more reductionist and this perhaps explains the more traditional aspects in his approach to therapy. van Deurzen-Smith is more “top down” and this means giving priority to the “client’s” particular and irreducible “world-view.”

What perhaps every existential therapist is after is for this perspective to provide, not a “cure” for past wrong-doings and misfortunes or for life’s ambiguity, but a sense of dignity and meaning that account for these and prevent them from overwhelming. This is philosophical in part, but it is also highly personal and in an important sense *creative*. The artist, for Rank, “spews” out the world in his work whilst the neurotic “chokes on his introversions” (Becker, 1973, p. 184)<sup>51</sup>, but gentler means are also at our disposal so that without resorting to denial we can lift ourselves up, take some control over our lives, and look upon them ironically and affectionately.

## NOTES

1. For a brief history of the origins of this term see Cooper (1990, Ch. 1).
2. Note, for example, his comments in *General Psychopathology*: “if [the psychotherapist] . . . turns to the efforts of modern existential philosophy and uses these ideas as a means of *acquiring psychopathological knowledge*, making them an actual element of psychopathology itself, he is making a scientific error.” (1963, p. 776).
3. For more detailed histories of existential movements in psychology, see, for example, Keith Hoeller’s Introduction in Hoeller (1990); and Emmy van Deurzen-Smith (1997, Part II, Section 1).
4. See *When Nietzsche Wept* (1992), *Lying on the Couch* (1996). *Love’s Executioner* (1989) and *Momma and the Meaning of Life* (1999) are both collections of “tales of psychotherapy.” They are not strictly fiction, but, like many extended case-studies and other accounts of psychotherapeutic encounters, they read like short-stories. Later on I will say more about the connection between the existential paradigm and indirect means of communication in general, and in the last section between the existential paradigm and narrative in particular.
5. Their mouthpiece is *Existential Analysis*.
6. I am only giving the briefest details here, but will return to these areas and others later in this chapter.
7. By “ultimate concerns,” as we shall see, he means things like death and freedom.
8. See Sartre (1966, Parts 1 and 4).
9. A price existentialism pays for being paradigmatic is Popper’s question of falsifiability. If, within the realm of conscious processes, *everything* can be interpreted existentially and there are no empirically refutable predictions that it can make, then it loses any claim it has to being scientific. (See Popper, 1963). However, and along lines similar to Freud’s defense of psychoanalysis, if existential therapy was ineffective and if the probings of existential texts *persistently* did not accord with intuitions then these would be good grounds for doubt.
10. For a brief account of these concerns see the prologue to *Love’s Executioner*.
11. See, e.g. (Becker 1973; Brown, 1959/1968; Rank, 1924/1929, 1941/1958; Tillich, 1952/1962).
12. The literal translation of the German *Unheimlichkeit* (see Heidegger, 1990/1926 Part I, Section VI). Like comparing interpretations of the Oedipus myth, reading Freud’s essay *The Uncanny* alongside

- Heidegger's analysis is a useful heuristic for understanding the difference between existential and psychoanalytic orientations. (Freud, 1962, Vol. 17)
13. Faith he sees as a home of sorts, but there is some ambiguity regarding its mutability, and it's hard won to say the least.
  14. For pointers towards empirical research that supports this, see Bee, (1998, pp. 514–517)
  15. For instance, see Sartre's colorful example of the masochist paying to be whipped (1943/1966, p. 493).
  16. I am reminded here of Ken Loach's approach to film making. A technique of his to encourage actors to identify with and care about their characters is not to let them know the entire plot in advance. In the Spanish Civil War story *Land and Freedom*, for instance, the cast were only given their lines on the day of shooting, before which they didn't know whether their character would make it through the day in one piece. (Source—The Late Show, BBC 2, May 15th 1995)
  17. For a summary of the "characteristics of a mature, need-free relationship," see Yalom (1980, p. 373).
  18. Daniel Dennett's term (cited in Flanagan, 1996, p. 69).
  19. William James' expression, which Yalom draws our attention to. In *The Principles of Psychology* James lists five kinds of decision, the spirit of which is very close to Farber. (See James, 1890, Ch. 26, and Yalom, 1980, p. 315).
  20. For interesting philosophical discussions and further references on character and moral psychology see Flanagan (1991).
  21. "Fear of death determines the element of anxiety in every fear." (1962, pp. 46–47).
  22. "From both my personal and professional experience, I have come to believe that the fear of death is always greatest in those who feel that they have not lived their life fully. A working formula is: the more un-lived life, or unrealized potential, the greater one's death anxiety." (Yalom, 1989/1991, p. 111)
  23. But not necessarily that close. For an extremely interesting (and ambitious) attempt to integrate various stage theories in psychology and philosophy, see Wilber (2000).
  24. Relevant also here are Rank's three stages in the development of the will—"counter will," "positive will" and "creative will" (Yalom, 1980, pp. 295–297).
  25. For example, Kierkegaard (1849/1989); Heidegger on our "they-self" (1990, Division I, Section IV and Division II, Section IV); Sartre on bad faith (1966, Part One, Ch.2; 1961), Camus (1951/1984); Tillich (1952/1962).
  26. Interestingly, Kierkegaard, pre-empting Freud said "when insanity has a mental basis, it is always due to a hardening at some point in the unconscious" (1987, Vol. I p. 83).
  27. See Nietzsche (1882/1974), Laing (1968, 1969), Hesse (1989), James (1890, 1915/1967), Tillich (1962), Kundera (1985).
  28. "Style" has a distinctively Nietzschean meaning here by the way.
  29. Also in the research tradition of social psychology the tendency to distort our memories in order to maintain a positive self-image has been thoroughly investigated under the banner of "cognitive dissonance" (Festinger, 1957). The theory states that instances where there is a perceived conflict between one's attitude to oneself and how one has in fact behaved creates a tension or anxiety that motivates an unconscious distortion of the recalled meaning of one's action. The types of (often implicit) self-beliefs revealed by these experiments include "I am not a hypocrite, "I say what I believe" and "I do what I want to do". (See Brown, 1965/1967, Ch. 11)
  30. For a thorough treatment of this (though different in some respects to what my approach has been) see Flanagan (1991, Ch. 15).
  31. See, for example, Alloy and Abramson (1982).
  32. For example see the appendices of Zuckerman (1979).
  33. Some widely chosen examples are Kierkegaard (1985), Conrad (1973), May (1991), and the relevance of "the voyage" to Laing's work (see Heaton, 1995).
  34. See, for example, Herrigel (1953/1985).
  35. For a sophisticated analysis of criteria see MacIntyre (1981) on "practices."



36. I don't think it's too much of a liberty to extend Nagel's analysis in this way. From an objective point of view we intellectually note this oddity, but subjectively we are emotionally disturbed by it. Filled up with, surrounded by a "meaningful" life we are aggrieved in some way by what objectivity reveals. Perhaps a sense of "absurdity" arrives at rare and fleeting moments where we bridge these points of view, but otherwise Nagel's point is nicely demonstrated simply by our difficulty in finding a single word or experience that captures what he has in mind.
37. I find Yalom too optimistic in this regard, so too Boss (for example see Boss, 1957/1963, Ch. 16).
38. See, for example, Brehm (1956). Similar motivations no doubt contribute to a conclusion reached from research into typical biases in decision making and judgment. One writer (Plous, 1993) concludes that the one best recommendation for debiasing our decision making processes is the "consideration of the alternative perspectives" (p. 256). This might sound like a very avoidable error, but the findings are that it is one we are heavily prone to.
39. A similar idea is discussed in moral philosophy under "agent regret" (see Rorty, 1980).
40. Marcia's (1980) development of Erikson's adolescent stage is sensitive to this.
41. Heidegger places a strong emphasis on guilt (or debt) in this sense as well, as do Sartre and Camus in their own ways, particularly with regard to our relations to others (rather than our past). See, for example, Camus (1984), and comments such as "The original sin is my upsurge in a world where there are others." (Sartre, 1966, p. 531).
42. Gordon Allport's expression (cited in Yalom, 1980, p. 431)
43. For similar, but ostensibly non-existential, accounts of the nature of emotions see Oatley and Jenkins (1996, Ch. 4).
44. For summary and further references see Oatley and Jenkins (1996, Chapters 1 and 4).
45. See Ratcliffe (2001).
46. Relevant to many of his works, but see especially Concluding Unscientific Postscript.
47. Conscious self-depreciation is a feature of both Yalom's and van Deurzen-Smith's writings. It is especially true of the former's popularist books like *Love's Executioner* and *Momma and the Meaning of Life*, and with the latter there are good examples in the Prologue to *Everyday Mysteries* and in the case study at the end of the book (especially pp. 271–273).
48. For example, "disidentification" (Yalom, 1980, p. 164) and his list of "artificial aids" such as the "existential shock" technique, "anticipatory regret" and the "tombstone exercise" for developing more authentic relations with death (Yalom, 1980, pp. 173–187, 1996/1997, pp. 179–180, pp. 270, 362). Perhaps one of the first such techniques was Nietzsche's eternal return: As a test of authenticity Nietzsche's demon—our therapist—asks, would we want to relive this life in all its details 'times without number'? (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 341)
49. Stephen Mulhall's summary of the meaning of anxiety in Heidegger (Mulhall, 1996).
50. van Deurzen-Smith says that the "client" must be seen as "his or her own source of light" (1997, p. 188) and that the analyst should "venture into . . . the other's world experience as if they were going into unknown territory" (p. 218).
51. Paraphrasing rank.

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